Cyberspace Security Can be Gone in a Flash

December 2008

Armed conflicts throughout the ages have had days when no spear was thrown, no bullet fired, no missile launched. Even the Hundred Years War (Valois versus Plantangenet for the French throne – you remember) only had eighty or so years of actually fighting. We should be so lucky. The fact is we are now embroiled in a conflict with no end, no ceasefires, no time outs. This war is not a shooting war in one of the world's hot spots. This unending struggle is in cyber space and will be a raging conflict until the last circuit board is fried.

This crisis requires constant vigil because the enemy, ranging from state supported hackers to the kid in the coffee shop, is probing our defenses every nanosecond. They can reach us from every corner of the globe at any given moment. To many, that's a sobering thought. While some discount it as fear mongering, the daily news and reports from international cyberspace experts drive home the point – the war is ongoing with no end in sight.

Solid defenses against cyber attacks exist. Many of these defenses rely on strong and constantly adapting computer safety technologies. Unfortunately, the weakness in this defensive perimeter is usually human. While the recent decision to ban thumb drives and other flash memory products from military computers was based on a technical vulnerability, the situation was made worse by human error and poor judgment.

Not having thumb drives at our disposal is a major headache as some are finding out. The fact is complacency and familiarity had set in. The protections available on government issued drives were bypassed frequently for the sake of a few seconds of effort. The use of personal drives in government computers was far too frequent. The result was a virus that was traced back to thumb drive misuse. Notably, it was a well-known virus, not some insidious super virus targeting only the U.S. military.

It is time for all people with access to government computers to upgrade to Personal Responsibility 2.0. The earlier version is no longer supported and will not run on any machines connected to the Global Information Grid (GIG). The training and information is out there and there is more on the way. We have seen that if you play dangerously and someone gets hurt, they take away your toys.

During the holiday season, we need to give ourselves the gift that keeps on giving – information assurance. Right now, soldiers are signing, "all I want from Santa is my thumb drive back." Their loss could have been prevented.